

Turkey: what do we know about this important country?

Discussion at The Park

Wednesday 5 July 2017 7:30pm at *The Park Tavern, Macclesfield*

An Introduction:

The country of Turkey is often in the news, for both good and bad reasons. Some of us may have been there on holiday. It seems to bridge East and West and is a very large country. Western Europeans have, for centuries, both feared and been intrigued by "the Turks". Its ancient capital – Istanbul – is one of the world's mega-cities and perhaps one of the most important, strategic locations in human history. The centenary of the formation of the modern, secular state of Turkey falls in 2023. There has been a huge number of books about all aspects of Turkey, published in the UK, as the centenary of secular Turkey draws near. One writer in the Financial Times (13 Jan 2017) described 2016 as Turkey's "year of coup and counter-coup, razed Aleppo, unremitting religious terror, desperate refugees, an assassinated Russian ambassador and a new name for a bridge over the Bosphorus." Can we get anywhere close to understanding Turkey's complex culture and politics?

Questions:

1. Is there anyone in our circle who has visited Turkey, either socially or for work? If so, what is your key overall impression of the part(s) of Turkey you experienced? After this, going around the circle, each is invited to make an opening remark. (As this is a big topic, please make these remarks brief.)
2. Turkey is a big place and has a sizeable population. What do we know about the geography, climate and size of the country? What do we know of its population?
3. It has a very, very long recorded history. The world's oldest known place of worship was built at Gobeckli Tepe about 9,500BC and the world's oldest known town was built at Catalhoyuk about 7,500BC. The place now called Istanbul has been settled since at least 6,000BC. Do we know any key events from Turkish history before, say, 1900?
4. What influences has Turkey had on *our* civilization over the centuries before 1900? And the impact of Western culture on Turkey before 1900?
5. What were the main changes and events of 20th century Turkey, of which we are aware - in culture, in politics, in economic policy, in diplomacy?
6. In contemporary times, does Turkey belong in the West, or does it belong in the East? Does it have to choose or can it be a genuine bridge between East and West?
7. In recent times, liberal opinion in Europe often saw Turkey as the great hope of becoming an Islamic society with a robust democracy. Was this a delusion born from little understanding or has the rise to power of President Erdogan really been a radical deviation from the liberal view?
8. In closing comments, going around the circle, what are the most striking things we have learnt about Turkey from each other?

Some Background:

(a) A general introduction to Turkey can be found on Wikipedia: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turkey#Architecture>. CAUTION: this is unusually long, by the standards of Wikipedia, but it is well indexed. So, just dip into the bits that interest you.

(b) The contemporary Turkish novelist, Elif Shafak, lives in London and is often on BBC radio or TV, commenting on Turkish culture. A recent (15 May 2017) video (25mins) is here: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/b08s7nbt/hardtalk-elif-shafak>.

(c) If your interest in things Turkish is sparked by our discussion, the following book would be one way to learn a bit more: *Istanbul: a tale of three cities*, Bettany Hughes, 2017.